

**Form of Play**

**Nathan Myles Tommer**

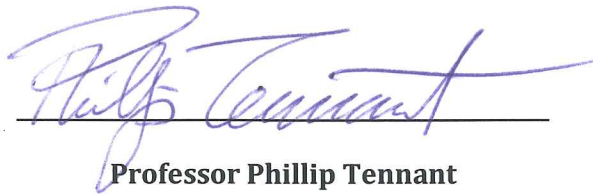
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**Form of Play**

**By**  
**Nathan Myles Tommer**  
**Master of Fine Art**


**Herron School of Art and Design**  
**IUPUI**  
**Indiana University**


  
**Professor Phillip Tennant**  
**Advisor**

  
**Professor Craig McDaniel**  
**Committee Member**

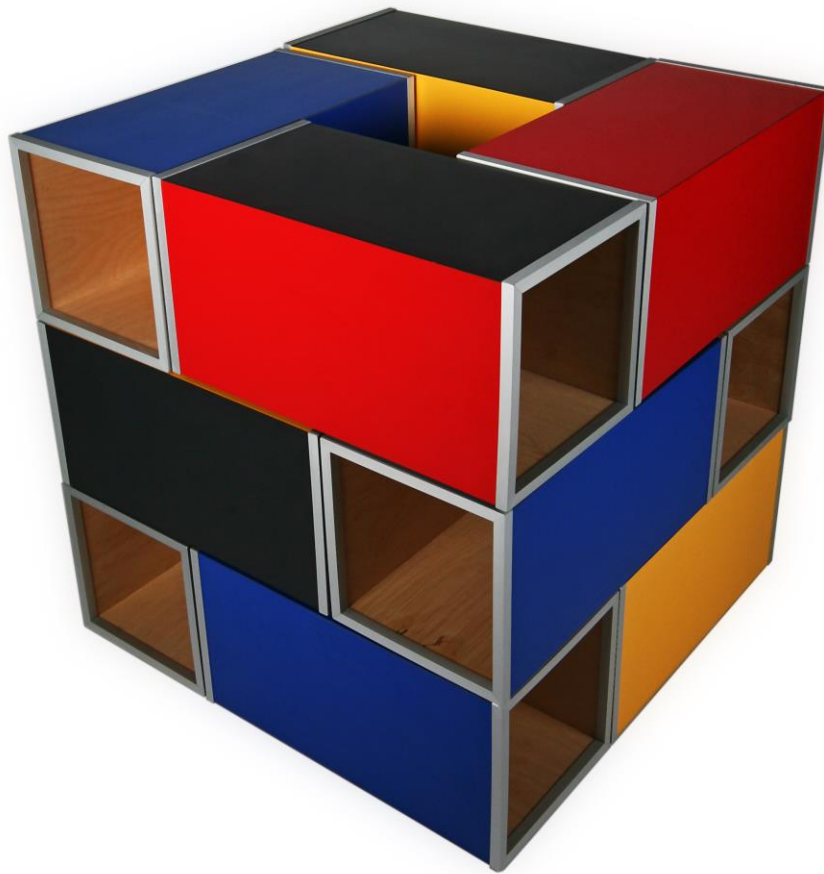
  
**Associate Professor William Potter**  
**Committee Member**

**Accepted: May 2014**

  
**Professor Valerie Eickmeier**  
**Dean of Herron School of Art and Design**

  
**Date**

## Cubic Tubes – 2012



The name *Cubic Tubes* is not merely descriptive of the shape of the components which make up this piece but is also a play on the name *Rubik's Cube*. This piece was created in homage, not only to the power of rectilinear forms and primary colors ala the *De Stijl* movement, but also to the formative power of art as embodied in the guise of a toy. Erno Rubik, sculptor, architect, and design professor, created the *Rubik's Cube* in 1974 primarily "...as an object of art, a mobile sculpture symbolizing stark contrasts of the human condition: bewildering problems and triumphant intelligence; simplicity and complexity; stability and dynamism; order and chaos." (Rubiks.com).

*Cubic Tubes* is composed of twelve individual four sided 'boxes' (or rectangular tubes) sized 11" x 11" x 22". The overall dimensions of the piece when assembled in

this formation are approximately 33" cubed. It is constructed from half inch thick Baltic birch plywood which is sheathed on all sides by plastic laminate material and capped on the ends with an extruded anodized aluminum edging. It is a sculptural piece in that it is a formal exercise meant to stimulate heightened experience, and furniture in that the space which it occupies in the life of its user is one of interaction and service. It is meant as an object of function in realms both aesthetic and practical. The components can be arranged by their owner in an unlimited quantity of possible configurations. It thereby constitutes a very simple form of completely modular and open ended systems whose primary functional purpose is adaptation to the changing needs and desires of users in terms of space utilization; and whose secondary purposes are the pleasure and freedom gained in the mind of users by the knowledge of this flexibility, and the conceptual link to building blocks and toys that this allows.

Though this work was not featured in my Master of Fine Arts thesis show, I have included it here at the outset of the document written to accompany that show because I find it illustrative and informative of the genre of work that has been included; work which is descended in part directly from this piece. It should serve as a reference point as you read what follows, because while I *will* illustrate and describe in detail the final results of my MFA research in the last section of this writing, I will first touch on the history, mental processes, principles, and research which inspired their creation.

### **My Artwork**

I describe the work that I have made for my MFA thesis show as sculptural, Modernist inspired furniture, with forms based on or derived from those of classic mass manufactured children's toys. It is a body of work which was initially conceived as a

reaction to what I felt were the latent formal associations between certain types of children's toys and prototypical Modernist furniture designs. The idea that there may be a relationship between toys and Modernism first occurred to me in the early part of 2010, while obtaining my bachelor of science in industrial design. Later that year I solidified my intention to create a body of artwork which would explore both the validity of that perceived connection and its aesthetic potential. This paper and the thesis exhibition which it is written to document and accompany are the tangible results of that intention.

I have always loved toys, and my initial reason for attaining a degree in industrial design was to work in that industry. However as I worked through the courses I found that the vocabulary of toy forms became increasingly integrated into many of the non-toy projects I was designing. An example of this are the espresso cups from 2008 pictured below. The stacking system for these cups was inspired by *Lincoln Logs* – a toy developed by John Lloyd Wright which he claimed was inspired by his father's design for the foundation of the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (Carlisle).



Through my research I have discovered many such interesting parallels between the inception of what we think of as 'classic' toys, and Modern art. I now conceive of play as one of the primary formative and connective concepts linking many of the historically significant Avant-garde and Modern Art movements. Furthermore I have found that these groups often manifested their ideas about the sanctity of play through the incorporation of toy forms into their work. Charles and Ray Eames for example composed several films which made extensive use of toy based imagery and Charles said to *Think* magazine in 1961 – “Toys are not really as innocent as they look. Toys and games are preludes to serious ideas.” (Demetrios). – Similarly Charles Baudelaire wrote in his 1853 book *La Morale du JouJou* (The Philosophy of Toys) “The plaything is the first initiation of a child to art”. I believe that these and many other visionary artists clearly understood the importance of a spirit of playfulness to creativity, as well as the communicative power of play’s physical corollary – the toy – in embodying this idea. I also believe they understood, as I do, that this formal and conceptual play is not an end in itself, but rather a beginning – a scaffolding from which to begin the more important cultural work of an artist.

The most important role an artist can serve is to assume responsibility for reflecting certain facets of culture back to itself. I believe this should be approached with an ideal of cultural enlightenment toward progress through self-understanding. For example, one of the aspects of culture which I aim to highlight is a lack of awareness of, and appreciation for, the beauty which surrounds us at all times, specifically the lack of deference we often exhibit for the sanctity of childhood and childish things. One of

the goals of my MFA thesis work is an attempt to acknowledge this debt by elevating the forms of children's toys to the level of 'high art'.

The work is also interested in the building of connections between facets of human experience which tend to be perceived as distinct but which are in fact points in a single continuum. Sophistication is a product of play as childhood begets adulthood and history begets the present. My contention is that there is aesthetic value in the exercise of collapsing these points – in short circuiting the established hierarchies of time and personal experience – if for no other reason than because it serves us as a culture to challenge our notions of significance.

My artwork is a personal and public exploration which embodies many things: a personal quest for understanding, my interest in formal relationships, my passion for toys and furniture, and my nostalgic interest in history. In the following pages I will give a brief synopsis of some of the historical research which has informed this thesis work and a physical and conceptual description of the work itself. I will then summarize and conclude with some final thoughts about the value of my time spent in Herron's MFA program.

### **History of Play**

As mentioned above, I have discerned through my thesis research some extremely intriguing and tangible historical connections between classic toy forms, the creative play they engender, and Modern art. For this synopsis of that research I will begin with the pioneering work of Friedrich Froebel, the founder of Kindergarten, and touch on his relationship to the advent of Modernism in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries. I will also talk about some Modernist movements with regard to how their ideas and work were informed by toys and play.

### **Friedrich Froebel**

Friedrich Froebel was an ingenious and daring pedagogue and educational reformer who lived and worked in Germany in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A man of diverse interests and influences who studied and worked in a great number of technical and intellectual fields throughout his life, Froebel's most pronounced claims to history are his invention of the concept of Kindergarten, and his systematic development of a series of didactic toys called Gifts and Occupations. Through the carefully guided use of these learning tools Froebel believed he could help children comprehend everything from the most basic properties of mathematics and geometry, to his philosophical and spiritual vision of a humanity freed by self-directed education through play. While neither Kindergarten nor the Gifts and Occupations necessarily lived up to all of these goals, they did have (and continue to have) a tremendous impact on many aspects of western culture and civilization – one of the most interesting and perhaps unintended of which is the impact they had on the development of Modern art. The reason for this impact is both conceptual and formal.

The formal connection lies in the fact that the toys which Froebel developed were essentially a series of abstract geometric components which children were meant to recombine and configure into simplified and symbolic representations of the natural and manmade forms and objects around them. Frank Lloyd Wright for example was trained in this method of Froebelian reductivism from a very young age and later said of



the experience - “mother found the ‘Gifts.’ And ‘gifts’ they were....Eventually I was to construct designs in other mediums. But the smooth cardboard triangles and maple-wood blocks were most important. All are in my fingers to this day” (Wright). Froebel and his teachers helped their pupils see the world through a connective lens of primary geometry which underpin all physical forms; as demonstrated by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright this lesson stuck.

The conceptual impact of Froebel’s work with young children stems from the fact that he and his protégés led the children to find their own particular creative power and voice through a process of learning via imaginative and open ended play. As Froebel put it – “The mind grows by self-revelation. In play the child ascertains what he can do, discovers his possibilities of will and thought by exerting his power spontaneously. In work he follows a task prescribed for him by another, and does not reveal his own proclivities and inclinations — but another’s. In play he reveals his own original power” (Froebel). One striking example of both a beneficiary and proponent of Froebel’s philosophical influence regarding the productive power of creative play was Johannes Itten. A onetime Froebelian Kindergarten teacher, Itten wrote in a 1919 letter to a friend (regarding one of his courses at The Bauhaus) “...I suggested that we should make toys for the next few weeks. So I struck a powerful blow to the old academic tradition of the nude and drawing from nature and I am leading all creative activity back to its roots, to play” (Hoch). Astonishingly Wright and Itten were not the only masters of Modernism to whom a direct link to Froebelian teaching can be traced. Moreover there have been a spate of recent exhibitions and writings regarding this and other links between Modernism and play.

## **Modernism and Play**

The acclaimed Spanish sculptor Juan Bordes says in his essay *Building the Avant-garde through Play* from 2011, “However fascinated we are with Art (or precisely because of this), if we allow our gaze to look beyond artistic production at the routine, everyday environment in which the avant-garde creators existed, we will encounter numerous explanations for the birth of their ideas.” In the following I will illuminate just a few of the myriad connections between toys, play, and the genesis of the avant-garde and Modernism that I have discovered through my research.

## **Cubism**

In his 1997 book *Inventing Kindergarten*, author Norman Brosterman argues that, of Picasso and Braque, Braque was the more important instigator of the shift toward geometric abstraction, writing “it may have been Picasso who discovered its track and pointed the way, but it was Braque who put the cube in Cubism.” Brosterman also makes the case that because of the economic and geographic circumstances of his upbringing, Braque would almost certainly have had a Froebelian derived kindergarten education including much design work with and influence by the ‘Gifts’.

The most compelling evidence connecting Cubism to toys and play however comes by examining the works themselves. Not only do the subjects of Cubist paintings often revolve around objects and accoutrements of leisure and playtime, such as musical instruments, dolls, and the playing of games, there is also the intriguing tendency to include the letters JOU somewhere in the work. This tendency is exemplified in the first piece of Synthetic Cubism, Picasso’s *Still-Life with Chair Canning*.

Renowned art historian Helen Gardener says of this detail: “The letters JOU appear, as in many Cubist paintings, and refer to the French word Journaux or journal for newspaper. Picasso and Braque delighted in visual puns. The JOU is also referring to the words jouer and jouir the French words for ‘to play’ and ‘to enjoy.’” The references within Synthetic Cubist canvases to the ideal of creating art with the abandon of a child at play are inescapable.

### **Futurism**

Even the often deadly serious Futurists understood the importance of play and toys in the formation of a new society. In the 1915 manifesto *Riconstruzione futurista dell’universo* [The Futurist Reconstruction of The Universe] in the section titled “The Futurist Toy” Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero decry the state of Imitative and timid toys as “antigymnastic and monotonous,” saying they “can only cretinize and depress a child.” The two then proceed to enumerate the various ways in which Futurist toys will accustom children to new conditions such as: “completely spontaneous laughter (through absurdly comical tricks)”; and “imaginative impulses (by using fantastic toys to be studied under a magnifying glass, small boxes to be opened at night containing pyrotechnic marvels, transforming devices, etc.)”; and even “to physical courage, to fighting and to war (with gigantic, dangerous and aggressive toys that will work outdoors)” (Belli).

### **Dada**

Conceived in the context of an international group of artists absurdly play acting behind ‘Cubist’ masks in the Cabaret Voltaire, Dada was likely named after the French

word for a child's hobby horse. In one of his many comparisons between Dada, childishness, games, and play, Hugo Ball (the founder of the movement) said "The child will be the accuser at the last judgment... It [Childhood] is a world that is hardly noticed, a world with its own laws. No art can exist without the application of these laws, and no art can be accepted without their religious and philosophical recognition" (Ball).

### **Bauhaus**

Most are aware of the function driven, efficient, minimal, and production based aesthetic that evolved through the years at the Bauhaus, but do not realize that the atmosphere which fostered this creative renaissance was permeated with a sense of bohemian permissiveness and play, particularly during the Weimar period. This playful Bauhaus produced some excellent child-centric student work such as Hirschfeld Mack's didactic color mixing tops for learning and play, and an entire nursery design by the under-credited female Bauhausler Alma Siedhoff-Buscher for the Bauhaus exhibition of 1923. A vision which is "widely regarded as the first true manifestation of the Bauhaus in furniture construction and design..." (Kinchin).

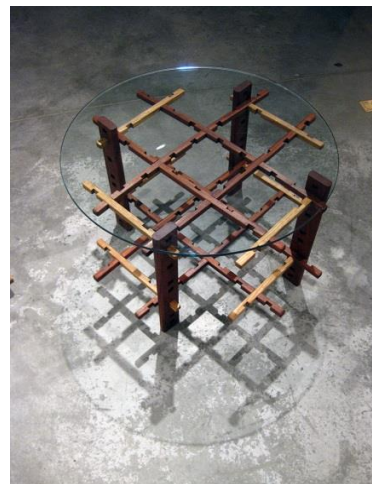
The masters at the school were also highly influenced by toys and play, the previously mentioned Itten gave a very early address to the school entitled "Our play – our festivity – our work." in which he said: "Let us build toys for festivity in perfect work. Let us build trees – houses – animals – shepherds – angels – stars – as children for children." Also among the ranks of playful Bauhaus Masters was the introspective and enigmatic Paul Klee who wrote that "Art plays an unknowing game with things. Just as a

child at play imitates us, so we at play imitate the forces which created and are creating the world” (Weber, 137).

### **Thesis Exhibition**

Because my original vision for this body of work was – as previously stated – furniture whose design is informed and inspired by a combination of both Modernism and toys – it was important for me to attempt to understand what the existent relationship between these two things was. The conclusion that I have reached through all of this is essentially that my intuition was correct. Without having done any research, and without any prior knowledge of the depth of their affiliation, when I looked at Modern furniture design I could see the influence of toys. What I have tried to do with the following work is to amplify this preexisting condition so that others can appreciate it as well. In the following section I will talk specifically about the pieces selected for the exhibition. I will give a physical description of both the process used to make them, and the results of those processes, as well as touching on some of the specific thinking behind the creation of each piece.

### **Play Table and Chair - 2012**



Like the *Cubic Tubes* these pieces were made in 2012 and represent an earlier mode of my MFA research which was more explicitly based on toy forms and ideas of play. The materials used are all solid stock lumber including, walnut, ash, oak, and sapele. Conceptually the pair is meant to evoke a kind of ambiguous territory between sophistication and playfulness; a personal ambivalence between the identities of child and adult, and the ways in which each exists within the other.

One interesting breakthrough for me with these pieces was the technical process that I used to arrive at the final forms. Stemming from a mental challenge to find a way to create usable structures of wooden members without the use of any glue or mechanical fasteners, I devised a system of weaving with wood. A system reminiscent again of the half-lap joinery used in *Lincoln Logs*, but one which is structural and self-supporting through tension in three simultaneous directions rather than reliant solely on gravity. Within this system, all of the identical parts are interchangeable and can interlock at a ninety degree angle to one another; forming a type of infinitely expandable matrix. I first applied this system to a chair design which I drew and modeled digitally. But while constructing that piece I found the main benefit of this system was that it afforded me the opportunity to explore any number of forms beyond the one which I had initially designed and drawn. Like a child at play I could create a piece one day then disassemble and rebuild something completely different the next. The current form of this chair is its third iteration, and the table is actually a byproduct in that it is made from spare parts and left over materials from the chairs I had been building.

The poetry in this is the idea that nothing is fixed. Neither in our minds nor in our physical world. Also that the history of this transfiguration becomes inherent to the 'final' result. Pristine toys collected in their packages are both beautiful and sad for their exaltation, but a toy is only really a toy when it has been well played with.

### **Gravity - 2013**

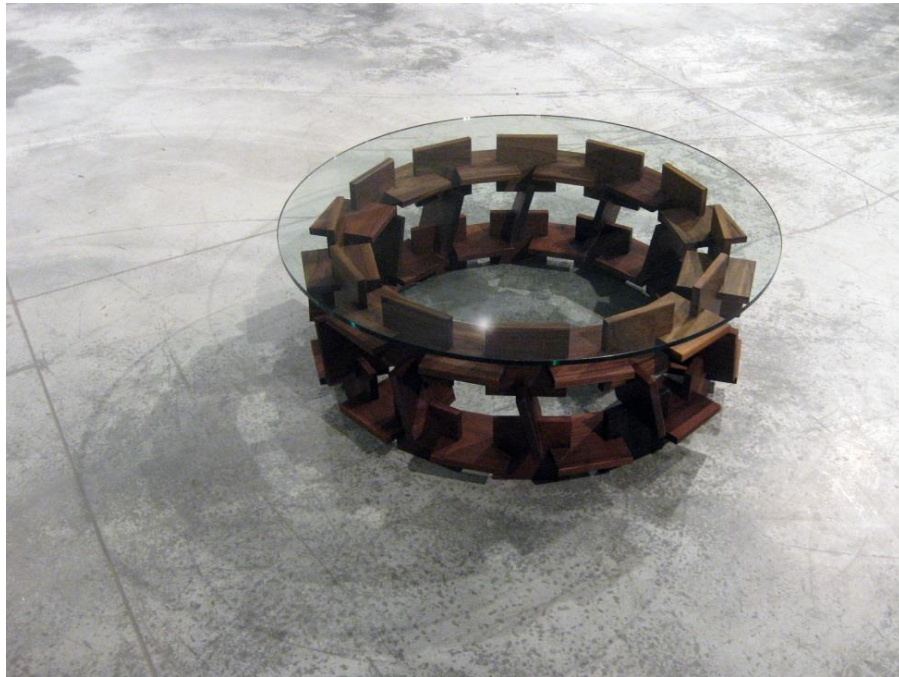


This is the final piece that I made using the interlocking stick system mentioned above, and is derived from the same process wherein a system for experimentation and play is created and work is begun without fully defining an outcome. In fact this was originally intended to be two separate end tables, but after much iteration became this conjoined grid within a grid. Some differences between the units seen here and those used on the previous pieces are that the members are a smaller size and are not symmetrical when rotated in the horizontal axis. This adds an additional complication when assembling because the orientation then becomes all important. The materials used are solid ash and concrete.

I call this piece *Gravity* because it is emblematic of my concern for the way in which I feel our society often neglects to adequately care for young people. My

conceptual reading of the piece is that childhood and play form the foundation of our foundation. The building blocks of today are the architecture of tomorrow and we as adults bear the heavy responsibility to make a better world for our children.

### **Unity - 2013**



This piece is derived from a different block like system which I envisioned nearly fully formed in the beginning of 2012. The idea was that if I had a square unit with notches in the center of all four sides I could create a completely modular structure by alternating and interlocking these planes. I also realized that by making the notches in two sides angled I would create the opportunity to make an infinite number of forms including the full hoop type structure above, while varying this angle would vary the size of the resultant arc.

I call this piece *Unity* because I consider it the most fully resolved piece of work that I have made. This is likely because it had been fully planned through several phases



including drawing, digital modeling, and prototyping. I also call it Unity because it can be seen as symbolic of my ideals about community. While derived conceptually from a fully modular system wherein all of the parts are identical (as will be seen in later pieces), there are technically three different types of components in this piece. The vertical planes have two straight notches and one angled notch, while the horizontal planes have two angled notches, and the diagonal parts two straight notches.

When all parts in a system are identical each member is completely interchangeable and therefore essentially equal. When units become specialized to a specific task in the system, as here, the question of equality becomes less clear. Ultimately each part of the system is dependent on every other part, and the resultant structure will fail without the support of each one of its members. Complicating this idea is the fact that in actuality no two units in this system are identical; each has their own particular history, character, strengths, weaknesses, and beauty. To intensify ideas about the symphonic beauty of similar but unique individuals working in concert to form a unified whole, I have inserted a single piece made from wenge rather than the prevailing walnut. I find it interesting and ironic that the use of an anomaly functions to unify the piece conceptually. As in this piece, our strength is both our individuality and our ability to connect and rely on one another. We are universes within universes aligned, arrayed, and intertwined, and whether we observe phenomena at the microscopic or cosmic levels we unfailingly find astounding levels of order and unity.

## Balance – 2013



Made entirely from walnut, and an example of the completely modular version of the system mentioned above *Balance* is nonetheless the result of a very different approach to design. I mentioned that the idea for *Unity* arrived more or less fully formed, and that I had drawn, modeled, and prototyped the form before construction. The questions I posed to myself upon completion of that piece were these: can I now take this system and apply the principles of experimentation and spontaneous form finding which I had previously employed for my stick based project? – And could I achieve a form which matched the power, intensity, or beauty, of its pre-planned counterpart?

*Balance* is the fourth iteration of that attempt and is by far the most successful of that group. I learned with this piece that the system is far more adaptable than I had previously thought. Connecting angled notch to angled notch was something I avoided because I assumed that symmetry could not be achieved that way. When I allowed

myself the flexibility to break through my preconceived notions about what these parts could do I was rewarded with this strange and undulating form. Balance is a center between opposing forces. It is a precarious and tenuous position. The world generally and societies such as our own are teetering between progress and failure. One false move and systems can irrevocably collapse. Until we can reckon with the challenges of a world ravaged by violence and the excesses of unsustainable consumption we will at best be hanging in the balance.

### **Faith – 2013**



I eventually came to realize that what I was doing through the process of letting go of predetermined outcomes was taking it on faith that my creativity would prevail, and that I would be able to find forms that worked strictly by virtue of my adherence to the art making process. I therefore decided to let go of my plans to an even greater

extent in order to test that faith in myself and the process. This is the result of that challenge, and was the final piece made for this body of work.

Made from Baltic birch ply, and solid sapele, this piece is both a dry bar and an altar. There is an ethereality and lightness to the frame. It is solid yet shifting, as is faith, and were it not grounded by the earthy stability of the horizontal planes it would feel as if the piece could float away. I believe in the unity of all things as being derivative of a divine source and center, and I ultimately have faith that I as an individual, and that we as a society, can overcome all challenges presented to us in time.

### **Conclusions about Thesis Exhibition**

The process of working to attain this MFA, and of creating the work for this thesis show, has been a tremendous learning experience. The courses I have taken, and the sheer intensity of focus necessary to complete the work, have pushed me into realms which I would never have suspected existed within me. I am a visual artist and I believe my true success is evidenced visually by the resulting pieces of art. These demonstrate a coherent and striking visual idiom that is thought provoking, original, and historically informed.

I work essentially intuitively, but with the informed intuition of someone who is a caring participant in my culture, and has a grasp of what is happening currently and what has come before. I have given insight into the personal history and guiding principles which have driven me to become an artist, as well as the thematic, historical, and conceptual drivers that feed directly into my current exhibition work. I have also

given descriptions of individual pieces in order to illustrate that while there are overarching concerns, each piece of art is by definition an individual achievement with its own character and nuances. Neither my artwork nor my research aim to convince others to see things as I do – they rather represent my effort to do things as I see.

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